

Chapter Three

'Do or Die'

February 2007 ~ to ~ February 2008

18 years & 6 months old ~ to ~ 19 years & 6 months old

Nottingham

After my dad's funeral, I got a job at the Specsavers Call Centre...



With my sister safely on her way to London, I knew it was finally my turn to escape Gary's shadow.

Towards the end of my third month in the flat, I spoke to my brother. He was planning to move because all his housemates were graduating. In six months, he'd finish university and head up north to live with his girlfriend. We decided to move into a two-bedroom flat together.

Shortly after moving in with my brother, a dark feeling followed me, like a heavy cloud. I was miserable. Work consumed my life, but I hated every job I'd had. I didn't know who I was or what I wanted.

I hadn't minded a predictable 9-to-5, Monday-to-Friday lifestyle while my sister and dad had been around because I at least got to enjoy weekends with them. But after they both left, my weekends involved nothing memorable.

I applied to join the Army, but was deferred for six months due to an old knee injury

recorded on my medical records, which I'd received while playing football. The Army instructed me to go away, do knee-strengthening exercises, and then re-apply.

My brother and my best friend Simon didn't want me to apply because they were concerned for my safety. They would ask me questions like, "Sam, what are you going to do if you get your legs blown off!?" Consequently, these types of questions made me question myself as to whether I was doing the right thing.

My brother and my best friend Simon went on holiday at the same time, it was my chance to escape. I needed to put myself into a do or die situation. I was terrified at the thought of venturing into the unknown. I decided to keep my escape plans a secret from my brother and Simon because I was worried about the types of questions they would have asked me. I knew certain comments from them could have caused me to back out of the idea altogether.

Eve of Moving Day - 18:00pm

I spent the night at Simon's house. He'd left the keys with me so I could water his plants.

I decided to leave all of my possessions at home, planning to collect them the next morning. I wanted to spend my last night in luxury before setting off

Day One – £1100 Payday from Specsavers

I was shocked to be woken up by Simon. He'd arrived home early from his holiday due to an impromptu business meeting.

"I'm surprised to see you," he said. "I thought you'd be at work at 9:00am."

I told him I'd phoned in sick. He didn't question it. He had a quick shower, and then we got into his car. Simon decided to drop me off at home on the way to his meeting.

As we approached my flat, horror hit me. My brother's car was in the driveway. He'd come home early too.

I got out quietly and closed the door. Not hard enough. I did it again, slightly harder.

I walked down the driveway as slowly as I could. "Drive away now, Simon, drive away now," I mumbled to myself.

I snuck into the back garden. The shed held my mountain bike, my ticket out.

But someone had put a new padlock on it. Paranoia exploded. My brother had cut his holiday short. Somehow, he knew.

I quickly calculated: hit the padlock with something heavy. Remove it. Grab my bike. Make it past the front door before he could find his keys, make it down the stairs, unlock and open the door, cornering me.

Despite the risk, I smashed the padlock with a brick. It sprang open.

I sprinted past the front door, convinced my brother was mere seconds behind me.

I pedaled for my life.

A short, frantic ride later, I realized no one was following. I slowed down, catching my breath.

I arrived in Nottingham's city centre. Straight to the bank.

£1100. The most money I'd ever had all to myself.

I headed to the train station. But I couldn't board. No plan. No direction.

Frustrated, I locked my bike and sat on a bench to think.

Hours passed. Panic rose. I almost went home. But I couldn't face going back to my meaningless life.

~Important things happen on benches~

I sat as darkness fell. Still unwilling to go home. I needed somewhere to sleep.

Hotels were too expensive. I had no idea when I'd get paid next.

Then it hit me: a tent and sleeping bag. Nottingham canal path. Time to think.

I sprinted to the nearest camping shop. Grabbed everything I needed, including a rucksack, just before closing.

I found a tree near the canal. Set up my tiny home.

While sitting in my tent, I checked the train timetable. A map of the UK on the back caught my eye.

It sparked a childhood dream. When I was young, I'd wanted to go there and become a surfer. In that moment, the decision felt obvious. This was the plan.

I opened my phone and started making a list of everything I would need.

Clothes:

1 x Woolly hat / 1 x Pair of gloves / 1 x Waterproof coat / 1 x Waterproof trousers
1 x Hoodie / 3 x Pairs of trousers / 4 x Jumpers / 5 x T-shirts / 10 x Underwear
30 x Pairs of socks

Essentials:

1 x Sewing needle set / 1 x Torch – 2 x Batteries / 1 x Pen
1 x Battery-powered electric razor – 2 x Batteries

Toiletries:

1 x Shower gel / 1 x Toothbrush / 1 x Toothpaste / 1 x Roll-on deodorant / 1 x Mirror

Camping gear:

1 x Tin opener / 1 x Camping knife / 1 x Saucepan / 1 x Spoon / 1 x Camping stove
1 x Bottle of gas / 1 x Washing-up liquid / 5 x Sponges / 1 x Water bottle

Other:

1 x Phone charger / 1 x Bike pump / 1 x Puncture repair kit

Shortly after completing this shopping list, I started receiving calls from my brother. I sent him a text message explaining that I'd decided to leave but would be in touch with him in the near future. I then snapped my SIM card, paranoid that he might know how to track my phone—a skill I feared he may have learned during his technology degree at university.

Day Two

I woke up excited at the thought of going to Newquay.

I packed my tent and sleeping bag into my rucksack — decamped — and cycled toward Nottingham's train station.

At the ticket desk, I learned that if I booked an advance ticket to leave in a couple of days, it would be significantly cheaper.

I booked it.

With time to kill, I left the station and cycled along the canal path out of Nottingham. I didn't want to risk my brother or Simon finding me.

As I rode, I scanned the area for a well-camouflaged place to camp. Somewhere quiet. Somewhere hidden.

About an hour later, I reached a small town. I spent the afternoon shopping for more items on my Newquay list.

When the shops closed, a couple of hours before sunset, I found a safe place to urban camp.

I waited until it was fully dark before pitching my tent. If someone spotted it during the day, they might come back at night.

I slept through the night, uninterrupted.

Day Three

I decamped at sunrise, making sure there was no sign I'd slept there. I planned to use the same spot again that night.

I spent the day shopping for the remaining items on my list.

As evening came, I followed the same strategy as the night before.

Another quiet night. Another safe sleep.

Day Four – Moving to Newquay Day

I woke up excited. Today was the day I was finally leaving for Newquay.

I packed my tent and sleeping bag, stuffing my entire life into my backpack. Then I climbed onto my bike and started cycling back toward Nottingham's train station.

The sun was rising behind me.

It was an incredible moment. For the first time in my life, I felt truly free. I didn't know how long this way of living would last, but I knew I wanted to keep going.

When I arrived at the station, I still had a few hours to wait before my train. To pass the time, I sat down and read through some leaflets I'd picked up while shopping the day before.

They were about how to optimize personal safety while homeless.

The advice was clear: stay close to town and city centres. Sleep near other homeless people. Never isolate yourself. Safety in numbers.

I already knew I was going to do the opposite.

When I arrived in Newquay, I planned to head straight out of the town centre. People, especially at night, felt unpredictable. Isolation felt safer.

When my train finally arrived, I boarded with my backpack and my bike, ready to continue this new life.

I wasn't just travelling to Newquay.

I was answering the call of the urban wild — hoping to escape the cloud by venturing into the unknown, through a do-or-die situation.